THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM*

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My wife and I once worked as Dons (what in the U.S. might be termed a Resident Advisor) in a co-ed residence at the University of Toronto's University College. One of the building's porters, a older gentleman named Carl who has since died, worked the afternoon shift. Originally from somewhere in what we once called Eastern Europe, he had fought in World War II, for various armies. As one was defeated by another, a number of soldiers simply changed sides, took up with their new compatriots, and kept on going; after all, the alternative was more than likely not nearly as appealing.

Late one evening while on his nightly rounds, he came upon a small group of undergraduate students in one of the dimly lit common rooms, confessing to one another their past misdeeds: the curfews they had missed and their high school drinking-binges. Stopping for a moment, I was told the next morning how the porter had stood in the dim light just outside their circle and listened. Turning to him, a young student invited Carl to divulge one of his own past infractions. Because he was old enough to be the student's great-grandfather, more than likely they all anticipated hearing some quaint, antique recollection—a confession that would enable the old man to step into the light and join yet another new group of compatriots.

Instead of offering a familiar tale about the "good ole days," Carl replied in his thickly accented English:

"In zee var ve vould burn Polish villages."

In the complete silence that greeted his disclosure—calling his words a confession entirely misses the point of this anecdote—he turned, and, as it was told to me, walked back into the darkness to continue his rounds, having declined the invitation to join at least this one group.

Whenever I think of scholars and educated commentators dutifully working to identify the pristine center that can speak authoritatively for and to the proverbial Other, so as to bring about mutual understanding and thus tolerance, I cannot help but recall Carl upping the ante considerably. For those upper-middle class students were completely unprepared to entertain anyone's world as being so far removed from their own that Carl's story would be anything other than sneaking out of his room late one evening to meet a young lady. So, much like telling scary tales around a camp fire, their late-night confessions united this disparate group by reinforcing a specific set of boundaries concerning the expected and the allowable. Yet the students' dumbfounded reaction to the porter's report, recounted with no hint of shame or irony, makes apparent the parochial nature of their preferences—those that, prior to hearing Carl's tale, they saw as universal and self-evident.

I am therefore suspicious of the usually unseen socio-political work being accomplished by discourses on religious pluralism—discourses promoted by theologians and scholars of religion alike, concerned with identifying a supposedly deep and commonly shared core that unites that disparate group known as the world's religions. To quote the anthropologist, Karen McCarthy Brown, despite the possibly well intentioned arguments of those who believe that

the cross-cultural study of religion has a genuine, if limited, contribution to make toward the saying of this

larger 'we'..., it seems important to suggest that such an admirable goal, when adopted as the reason for beginning the study of another religion, may end up undermining more than supporting that goal.

She concludes by stating a general principle, well known to those who see religious pluralism as a tool of dominant groups: "Premature resolution of differences between world views somehow always ends up being a resolution on our terms" (1991: 226).

Perhaps we require a case in point to help give this critique some teeth. Take, for example, the widely selling CD-ROM classroom resource, *On Common Ground*. In one of the web articles that states the goals of the project, project director and nationally known Harvard scholar of American religion, Diana Eck, writes: "Pluralism requires the cultivation of public space where we all encounter one another." On one level this all sounds well and good for, as one might ask, "Who could ever be against a public space where we all encounter one another?" Despite the fact that I can easily imagine a few groups that might not wish to be included in this big tent, for the time being I'll grant to the proponents of this kind of pluralism that they have well intentioned, if somewhat nostalgic, visions of a public forum where citizen-equals once mounted the proverbial soap box and freely "spoke their piece." But it's not—nor ever was—as simple as this. Precisely what does it mean to "encounter" each other? What undisclosed ground rules stipulate the nature and extent of this encounter? More than likely, the soap box cannot be mounted by just anyone. After all, to participate in any so-called public space one must already be operating by a specific set of socio-political values and rhetorical/behavioral standards that make it possible, attractive, meaningful, and compelling to "encounter," "understand" and "appreciate" the Other in just this or that manner, in just this context, for just this end.

So, it seems reasonable to ask, Does one get to be part of Eck's "we" and her "public" if these values and rhetorics are not a priority? While I may personally find it commendable to work toward some sort of social inclusion—much like being in favor of "freedom," "family values," and politicians kissing babies, ill-defined inclusion is easy to be in favor of—I would be terribly remiss if I understood or portrayed the ground rules of such a supposedly inclusive, public forum as somehow being ahistorical, self-evidently meaningful, commonly shared, and utterly persuasive (much as those students more than likely perceived the ground rules to their session of late night confessions). It would be somewhat akin to celebrating the Internet as an open, democratic public forum, a characterization that fails to recognize the Internet's military-industrial origins and the degree to which one must be a government agency, corporate entity, or someone with time and money to burn to gain access to it. Much the same, presuming a disengaged "public" to which everyone automatically and equally belongs, and to which everyone wishes to belong, strikes me as having already resolved in "our" favor the issue of "the many" long before ever seriously entertaining differences among the much heralded "many." This is what Brown seems to have meant by the premature resolution of difference.

Or consider the book that preceded and, in many ways, was

the basis for *On Common Ground*. In *Encountering God*, Eck distinguished *pluralism* from both *exclusivism* and *inclusivisim* (1993: 168) and argues that *pluralism* is more than the recognition of a plurality and is far more demanding than mere tolerance of difference: one must *participate* within (i.e., encounter, engage, etc.) a plurality to count as a pluralist. As rightly observed by Eck, *tolerance* (i.e., putting up with) is, after all, an expression of privilege, for marginal groups tolerate nothing; instead, they are themselves *tolerated*!!

For Eck, tolerance therefore stands in the way of what she considered to be true pluralism. As she argues,

> If as a Christian I tolerate my Muslim neighbor, I am not therefore required to understand her, to seek out what she has to say, to hear about her hopes and dreams, to hear what is meant to her when the words, "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate" were whispered into the ear of her newborn child. (1993: 192)

But there is a difficulty in seeing such a wide divide between *tolerance* and *pluralism*, a difficulty that well meaning writers fail to recognize: one can't have it both ways. One can't call for an engaged pluralism among those committed to different deep values while at the same time arguing that this pluralism is more than mere tolerance. After all, the difference between pluralism and tolerance are merely rhetorical, for the only way to have such co-existing differences is if "the Other" is already playing largely by the same set of rules, making the leftover, minor differences something one can easily put up with. Case in point: Eck's dialogue partner in the above example is busy whispering sweet nothings into a baby's ear, not contesting late capitalism's worldwide hegemony.

If, as Eck asserts, "in a world of religious pluralism, commitments are not checked at the door" (1993: 193), then what do we do with those commitments which, for example, lead people to kill doctors who perform abortions, motivate people to handle rattle snakes in their church services, inspire men to have more than one wife, or prompt yet others to work toward the violent overthrow of this or that government? Are these commitments allowable in a pluralistic world, a world where we supposedly take seriously differences among competing core values? Or do such commitments so deeply offend some obvious, standard of decency to which all humans—insomuch as they share some non-empirical thing we call Human Nature—give assent? Which commitments are to be left at the door, then? If *real* pluralism requires openness and commitment, as Eck argues, then, given the colorful ideological spectrum on today's geo-political map, it is more than obvious that only a rather narrow party line of commitments will gain admission to this public square of open engagement. (Perhaps akin to only two Presidential candidates gaining routine access to the national media?)

By framing the question as follows, "How are we all to live with one another in a climate of mutuality and understanding?", Eck has loaded the dice in her favor, for not only are "mutuality" and "understanding" are not defined, the worldview that presumes these values to be self-evidently beneficial is neither articulated nor defended. Instead, she goes on to say, "Those who live according to an exclusivist paradigm frankly do not wish to live closely with people of others faiths and would prefer to shut them out ... or convert others to their own view of the world" (1993: 191). *Unless I am terribly mistaken, these so-called exclusivists Eck attempts to convert to her worldview are precisely the people who have the very real and yet different commitments; they are*

exactly the people whom Eck claims to be interested in living with on an engaged basis! Apparently, though, these are just the wrong strongly held commitments. As in the case of the University of Chicago's Martin Marty's *The One and the Many* (1997), only those accepting the dominant ground rules of mere conversation—as opposed to organized political action and practical contestation—are invited to mount the public square's soap box and tell their story.

Anyone not in favor of these rules and the social world they make possible is, understandably yet in suitably illiberal fashion, branded as an exclusivist by Eck or as radicals, militants, extremists, tribalists, agitators, people with strident voices who are inspired by belligerent leaders, by Marty. However, such name calling—for that is all that it is—strikes me as eliminating from serious consideration the very groups whom pluralists claim to take seriously. But in saying this, one must be clear that I am not offering a criticism of this tactic (much as I would not criticize those students for trying to build a new social identity by means of their late night storytelling); instead, I am offering a description of a particularly effective rhetoric that portrays self-beneficial, tactical maneuvers as timeless, abstract principles essentially shared by everyone. For, as the literary critic Stanley Fish observes, "[s]witching back and forth between talking like a liberal and engaging in distinctly illiberal actions is something we all do anyway; it is the essence of *adhocery*, which is a practice that need not be urged because it is the only one available to us" (1999: 72).

In arguing for an ill-defined engagement and an encounter that recognizes the necessity for "real commitments" that just happen to fall within a rather narrow party line, religious pluralists fabricate a toothless and thus easily tolerated and appreciated "Other" whose seeming differences—"Look, dear, they call God 'Allah'"—are easily resolved on "our" terms. That even such minor differences are never resolved on "their" terms—that some posited "we" never seriously consider that what "we" call 'God' is actually 'Allah'!—suggests that there is an unseen politics to discourses on religious pluralism.

References

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